

Roll Call Op-Ed, March 22, 2007

On the eve of the Congressional debate regarding our government's next budget, we four Republicans join together, offering new reforms to help end deficit spending. We sat down to discuss the problems we face and what solutions we have — and reached a conclusion that should be heard: Our government must stand on principles of fiscal conservatism and commitment to economic growth.

The deficit cannot be ignored. Under both Republican and Democratic majorities, Congress has failed to be a good steward of taxpayer money. The federal government borrows too much to spend even more. Congress has put spending on cruise control, and its Members know less about its financial position than the chief executives of any publicly traded company in America.

- In 1961, the federal government spent \$98 billion. We did not spend our first trillion until 1987. We broke the barrier into our second trillion in 2002. In 2010, we will soar into the \$3 trillion level.

- Federal debt held by the public climbed to more than \$3 trillion in 2006 — a 300 percent increase in the past quarter-century. Passage of the bipartisan Deficit Reduction Act in 1997 gave Congress the tools to achieve a 10 percent reduction in federal debt over four years. Since the DRA expired, debt owed to the public has increased by \$1 trillion.

- This year, interest payments on our debt topped \$200 billion, nearly 10 percent of total government spending. These payments must be made before we pay our first sailor, care for our first survivor or invest in our first science program.

There are no easy solutions. We must make tough choices, kill “sacred cow” programs and institute systemic reforms to roll back spending. Beyond limits, across-the-board cuts and a line-item veto, we need rules for all “emergency” supplemental appropriations that restrict such spending to true emergencies.

The budget must present a clear picture of the government's financial position. Despite public outcry, the budget spends the annual Social Security surplus, but only mentions how much this spending adds to the country's huge retirement liability in small-print footnotes. It should use the same accounting rules that apply to any publicly traded company to advise citizens how the decisions of past Congresses improved or weakened the financial stability of the federal government.

As Congress debates this year's budget, we will offer our principles of reform as amendments that pave the way for change. We can continue "business as usual" with a budget containing numbers that bear little relation to the real world and are quickly ignored, or we can establish a goal that in a few years we will be reducing public debt, not selling more.

We think the choice is obvious. Regardless of "conservative" or "centrist" labels, Republicans support simple, common-sense reforms to our budget and spending process — reforms to encourage saving federal dollars, not spending them. We will be introducing them later this year as the Budget Discipline Act.

Congress' actions should match its rhetoric. Our bill provides the necessary tools to enforce fiscal restraint and give the taxpayers a clearer picture on how their money is being spent. We want to design a roadmap for economic growth, giving the next generation equal prosperity and opportunity that we have enjoyed.

Our bill would ensure that when Congress sets limits, it sticks to them. Politicians who slip extravagant provisions in a bill will face extra scrutiny and must be prepared to publicly defend the spending. Even after a bill has passed, it will get an extra look. We offer the president a "legislative line-item veto" option to submit recommended cuts for a special vote.

Our bill improves transparency by requiring the disclosure of federal finances in annual budgets so that the taxpayers see our government's true public liabilities. The budget is now presented on a cash basis, what it takes in and spends in a single year, without accounting for the future liabilities of all government programs such as Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security. We are promising billions in benefits and can only be paid by tax revenues from future workers.

Finally, we recognize the need to look behind the numbers and find real solutions for the fiscal

challenges that we need to overcome. The best path to budget surpluses is through encouraging Americans to be productive and innovative, then reaping the benefits of robust economic growth, not by imposing more taxes on them.

The American people deserve a bold and honest approach to budgeting. As leaders, we should offer nothing less.

Reps. Mark Kirk (Ill.) and Charlie Dent (Pa.) are co-chairmen of the Republican Tuesday Group. Rep. Jeb Hensarling (Texas) is chairman of the Republican Study Committee. Rep. Mike Pence (Ind.) served as chairman of the RSC in the 109th Congress.